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SYNERGISM OF SUBSTANCE AND EMOTION

by

CAROLYN JEAN MILLS

**A Thesis Report Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of**

MASTERS OF FINE ARTS

in

SCULPTURE

Portland State University, 1984

TO THE DEPARTMENT OF ART AND ARCHITECTURE:

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My work in the Master's Program began with an exploration of materials and questions about how form alters concepts. During my first year I learned to weld and to fabricate sculptures from steel. I also made sculptures in plaster, supported by a steel armature. The tensile strength of the steel enabled me to make sculptures that incorporated space as an important element. I found the addition of space added aspects different from those of my earlier work in stone and clay. It became clear the forms created by fabricating steel pieces and joining them had a more complex and ambiguous sense of unity than the organic sense of wholeness found in my earlier work. In my work in plaster I saw the potential of using expressionistic surfaces without losing the subtlety of the form.

The addition of these new materials and processes broadened my range of forms and my ideas about sculptural wholeness while intensifying my curiosity about the effects that form and material may have on meaning. This became the focus of my thesis.

In my thesis work I used several materials, stone, plaster, steel, and bronze, in order to explore the effect of materials on meaning. The work itself was confined to a somewhat limited range of forms so the interaction of forms

and meaning could be more easily perceived.

All of the pieces I made with this intention could be described as containing an expressive component and a reserved component. By expressive I mean forms that are characterized by unexpected turns or angles, by something idiosyncratic and emotionally evocative. The reserved forms are characterized by a flatness of surface which expresses a kind of neutrality, clarity, and simplicity. I chose these kinds of forms first because they appealed to me and second because they contained a clear contrast that could be explored. I found almost immediately that in the context of an expressive passage, a reserved passage could acquire a feeling of hidden significance and potential expressiveness, and in the context of a reserved component, an expressive area could acquire an unexpected clarity and simplicity.

Two of the steel sculptures, Journey (fig. 1, steel), and Randy's Cross (fig. 2, steel), provided me with the opportunity to explore the subtleties of the interactions between the expressive and the reserved.

These sculptures bear an important resemblance to each other. Both have reserved components; both have parts that are expressive. Within each sculpture these forms are distinct. The sculptures are clearly related but affect us differently.

In Randy's Cross the expressive parts are rigidly connected to the reserved. While structurally this connection is most tenuous, visually the reserved and

expressive components complete each other and restrict each other. In Journey, the connection of the expressive and the reserved is also tenuous, but here we perceive its fragility. The expressive areas seem to move away from support. This gives the expressive component motion relative to the sculpture as a whole and exaggerates the stillness of the rest of the piece. The unstable relationship of the reserved parts to the ground contradicts this reserve and stability and also animates the reserved components.

The methods of connection and the interrelationship of the parts that give the whole its form provide two somewhat similar sculptures with very different effects. Randy's Cross is stable, rigid, and contained. Journey is unstable, active, and a peculiar blend of the contemplative and the tense.

The sculpture, The Cyrenian (fig. 3, steel), illustrates again how a very small change in the handling of the parts can make a significant change in the effect. The actual parts of The Cyrenian have an unmistakable resemblance to the parts of the previously discussed sculptures, especially to Randy's Cross. However, these parts are not clearly separated as expressive or reserved. One form flows into another, or twists and becomes the other. This gives the entire sculpture a sense of mobility and expressiveness that is essentially organic. It is not stable and rigid like Randy's Cross, nor contemplative and tense like Journey. It seems instead to be an animated whole, rather than a collection of parts.

To explore the influence of different materials on similar or related forms, I made a series of pieces in stone,

steel and plaster. The results can be seen by examining and discussing two of these sculptures, Little Earth/Altar (fig. 4, stone), and Dark Landscape (fig. 5, steel). These pieces resemble each other in having a broad, flat plane supported by a pair of 'legs', an area that rises above the plane, and an emphasis on the space below and above that plane. They differ in that the expressive area in Dark Landscape is the twisting section that moves above the plane, while in Little Earth/Altar the expressive areas are the untouched surfaces and the tooled surfaces.

These pieces, while apparently having much in common, actually approach the idea of the expressive and the reserved differently. This is partly the result of materials. The steel in Dark Landscape does not mimic something organic. It is not obviously expressive. Yet the twisted section seems expressive in contrast to the rigidity of the rest of the sculpture. The cutting and bending results in a less controlled and premeditated effect. This section's position, supported and surrounded by the rest of the sculpture, causes the very reserved forms to participate in its expressive message.

No area in Little Earth/Altar seems to be expressive at first glance. The entire shape is clearly and simply formed. Yet the fact that parts of the stone are unhandled and other parts are marked by tools gives to these surfaces, rather than to the forms, an expressive and suggestive feeling. The expressive feeling is enhanced by the stone itself. I think

the emotional impact of stone comes from its strong associations both with nature and with men's making. Unworked, it means nature. Shaped, the form means man-made, and tooled, the surface means labor and sweat. Simply because it has been worked, even the most reserved of forms can become expressive.

When I look at these pieces as complete works I see Dark Landscape as natural, as a landscape with its material adding shadows of ideas and feelings related to human creation and destruction. However, I see Little Earth/ Altar as man-made in a basic sense. The natural essence of the stone accentuates that it has been altered to embody a human meaning.

My sole conclusion from working with this issue is that material does alter in important ways the connotations of otherwise similar pieces. The interrelationship of form and material seems to be subtle and to depend in part on the inherent nature of our tactile responses to form and materials.

Other questions of more secondary importance to my thesis work are best approached simply as visual effects. In the pieces Little Earth/ Altar (fig. 4), Maker (fig. 6, bronze), and Swan (fig. 7, plaster), I explored the effects of my tactile experience on my visual experience. These pieces were all formed as much through tactile decisions as through visual. This is an area I will explore further in the future.

I am also interested in what can be called the esthetics of shadows. Two pieces are concerned with this issue, the Reclining Landscape (fig. 8, steel and plaster), and Little Earth/ Altar. In Reclining Landscape the entire dominant area

of the sculpture is above the viewer and in shadow. My intention was to vary the intensity of the shadows just as one varies the intensity of light, using darkness as one might use a highlight. I consider these to be tentative explorations, incomplete but interesting.

The last question which actively concerned me grew out of working in steel and looking at the work of modern artists like Anthony Caro, David Smith, and Julio Gonzales. Their works appear to emphasize line and plane over form. Space often holds a dominant place. They have strong silhouettes. Many of their pieces are concerned with the juxtaposition of reserved and expressionistic forms. Some of their works have a strong sense of immediate and unpremeditated handling. Initially, I found the strong silhouettes arresting, and the highly visual, calligraphic nature of the pieces magnetic. The sense of immediacy was also appealing. Some of these works dealt with concerns in keeping with my thesis proposal but approached them in different ways.

I made three pieces by bending and cutting steel fragments, attempting to maintain a casual and spontaneous handling of materials and to make pieces containing strong shapes made of space and emphasizing line, plane, and silhouette. It was absurdly easy to make pieces which temporarily held my interest through the use of a novel silhouette and textural changes. Making pieces that sustained my interest was far more difficult. A strong silhouette seems to be a good beginning point, but it is the subtle development of form

through the continuous movement of silhouette into volumes that interact with each other as well as with the whole, which creates a strong emotional impact. Of the three pieces I made one still holds some interest for me, Moonrise (fig. 9, steel); the others, just as with many of Caro's and Smith's works, soon lost their interest for me. The sole emphasis on silhouette in some of their pieces is soon fully explored by the mind and the eye ceases to see it. Those pieces of Caro's and Smith's that do maintain my interest are activated by a complex and changing silhouette. The surfaces themselves are rarely interesting; their flatness is a kind of neutrality generally without strong emotional implications.

Usually sculpture that emphasizes line and plane is less emotionally involving than work in which form dominates. Gonzales' work, which appears to contradict this statement, does contain pronounced elements of form but on an extremely abbreviated level, much as we find in a Giacometti figure. My interests and concerns require a commitment to working with form. I have become intensely aware of the difficulty of creating subtle forms in fabricated steel pieces. This is an important weakness in my steel sculptures.

My approach to my thesis work described to this point seems simple and straightforward. In actual fact, an event occurred which affected both the forms in my work and my understanding of my aims in making sculpture. This event concerned a friend of mine, a man named Randy Freels. Randy is a remarkable man with a remarkable body. He is severely handicapped. His body is not symmetrical and he is totally

helpless. He is physically both frightening and beautiful. Despite his harrowing physical limitations, Randy is a man of great spirit. He has a relentless intelligence and will, and an astonishing compassion and love for the rest of us. He graduated from Portland State University with honors, has coached basketball teams, written songs and managed a rock band, and is a published author.

In the summer of 1982 Randy spoke to me of his growing weakness. Since I have known Randy a long time, the possibility of his early death is not new to me. But recognition of the reality of his eventual death moved me to begin carrying out an idea I have had for a few years. I wanted to make a series of works that as a group comprised a portrait of Randy. Different pieces were to speak of different aspects of his nature, his torments, and his strengths.

I began work on a series of pieces about Randy, in addition to working on pieces related to my thesis proposal. The work in plaster focused on Randy. In two of these works, *Swan*, and *Reclining Landscape*, I relied on my several years experience drawing him because I already had a love and fascination for the abstract qualities of his body. Randy's body is like a fragment of shell found on the beach. It is white, nearly translucent, strange in its asymmetry, at once strong and brittle. Like the shell, he seems something scoured down to an essential but mysterious and ephemeral significance. Plaster, white and fragile, shares Randy's utter vulnerability, a nakedness which encompasses both his

body and mind and is hard to look at. I wanted my pieces to be intensely expressive of that vulnerability, and of the strength which transforms it. The plaster gives this. Its surface is capable of evoking the intensity of Schiele, or the scrapings of Munch.

I made a piece in steel, Randy's Cross, which combined the concerns of my thesis with my interest in Randy. Later, I returned to the plaster with the sculpture, Randy/ Ascension, (fig. 10, plaster). In this piece I again focused on Randy.

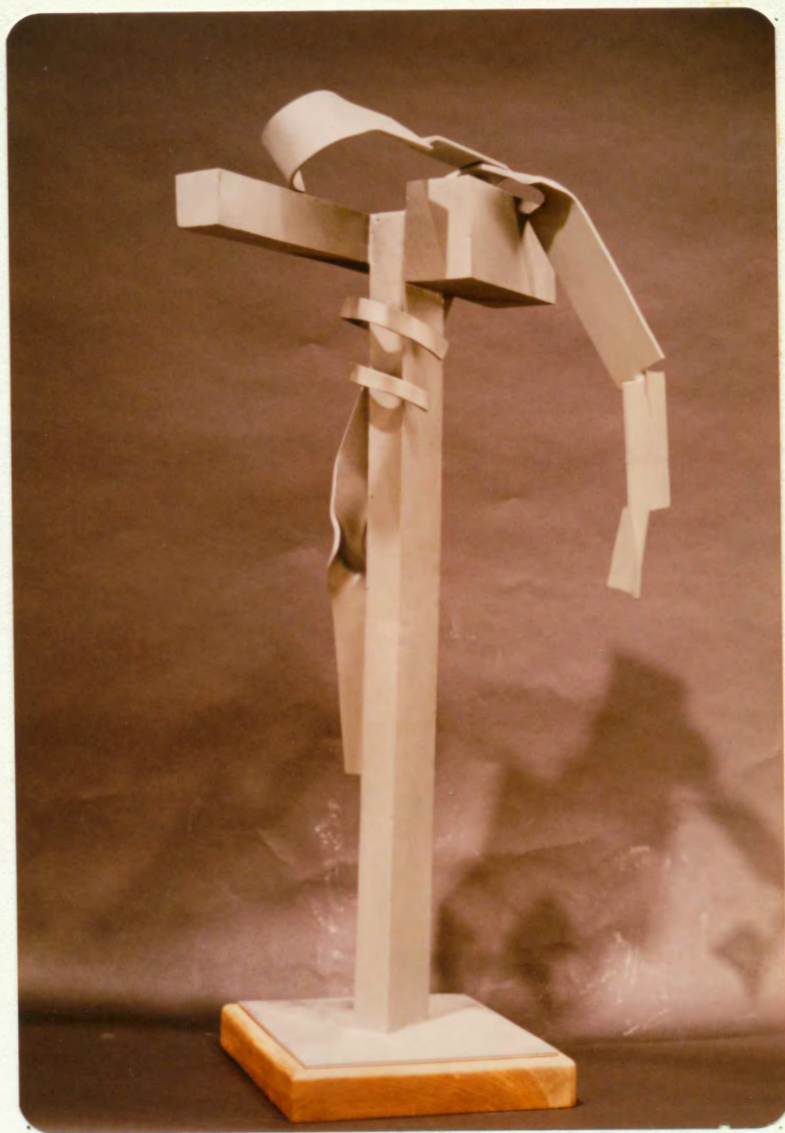
As my thesis work drew to a close I reviewed the results. I saw to my surprise not two intentions but one. The work leaned at times to more personal and expressive concerns, and at other times to formal issues, but it still was one body of work. I found that the most subjective and emotional of my pieces, and the one most strongly involved with Randy as an individual (Randy/Ascension), contains some of the basic concerns of my thesis proposal. Despite the figurative and narrative aspects of the piece and the expressive intentions in the handling of the surface, the form is forced to conform to an altered frame. Even though this form reflects in fact some of the shapes of Randy's body, it reflects also the desire to use the abstraction of his body with a concern about expressive forms, reserved forms, and meaning.

Looking at the pieces developed through formal concerns, I realized The Cyrenian is another kind of cross in which man and cross are one; it is an image of Randy. Journey is a piece concerned with instability and will. Randy's forms are

In it, as they should be. I had in fact expressed my love for Randy as an important part of the work I did in the Master's program, utilizing the formal and esthetic issues to further my emotional intentions. This reflects an aspect of myself which I mistakenly have regarded as somewhat peripheral in my artwork, but which I now know is not.



Journey (fig. 1, steel)



Randy's Cross (fig. 2, steel)



The Cyrenian (fig. 3, steel)



Little Earth/ Altar (fig. 4, stone)



Dark Landscape (fig. 5, steel)



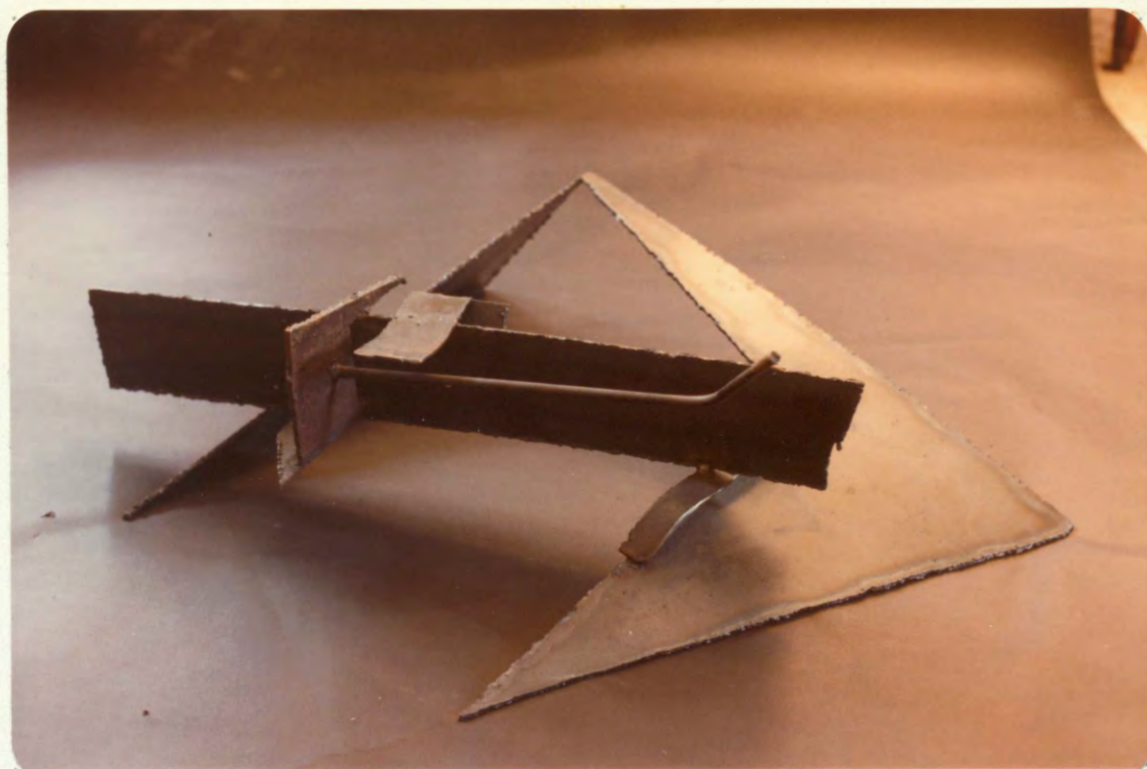
Maker (fig. 6, bronze)



Swan (fig. 7, plaster)



Reclining Landscape (fig. 8, steel and plaster)



Moonrise (fig. 9, steel)



Randy/ Ascension (fig. 10, plaster)